

Touché



Portrait of the Artist as a Dead
Communist Classic:
The Image of Bertold Brecht
in the German Media Coverage of his
100th Birthday and its Connections to
Recent Shifts in the German Brecht
Reception

Stefan Höppner-Stone

Und Brecht bestellt einen Erfrischungsdrink in der Bar des neuen Gruselkabinetts des Anhalter Bahnhofs. Die Inhaberin spendiert ihm sofort einen zweiten und spricht lachend: Mann, Sie sehen ja aus wie Brecht, wollen Sie nicht stundenweise bei mir herumspuken?! Brecht denkt an die Brecht-Tage und schwitzt leicht Die Dialektik, stottert er. Gut, sehr gut, prostet die Chefin zurück.

Lutz Rathenow

Das Große bleibt groß nicht und klein nicht das Kleine.

Bertolt Brecht

The 100th anniversary of Bertolt Brecht's birthday provides an opportunity to take stock of the image a reading public holds of this poet and playwright. There is no such thing as "the" image of Brecht as a given fact. Constructing "one's own Brecht" using selective quotes is easily possible, and one can choose from a wide array of Brecht images that already exist. This holds true especially in light of the recent celebration which has generated a vast multitude of articles in magazines, newspapers, scholarly journals, as well as radio and TV documentaries.

In examining the current Brecht reception, the author's home country, Germany, promises to be of particular interest, especially since

there the "images" of Brecht differ widely at this point. On the one hand, he is celebrated and embraced by public institutions and representatives of the political system, while others perceive him as a "dead classic," "der in der DDR zum Säulenheiligen erkoren wurde und später auch im Westen zum unverzichtbaren Unterrichtsmaterial für Post-68er-Gymnasiasten wurde Mancher Unterrichtsgeschädigte mag davon nichts mehr hören" ("Brecht auf!" n. pag.).

This study does not intend to reconcile these contradictions, but rather makes an attempt to explain them. To this end, I will examine small samples from a broad media coverage of the anniversary. The focus will be on contributions in two German newspapers that have appeared in celebration of Brecht's birthday. One of them is a daily series in *die tageszeitung (taz)* from Berlin, a liberal left-wing newspaper founded in 1979 with a young to middle-age "alternative" readership. The *taz* was chosen for this study because it targets an audience that supposedly has a high percentage of Brecht readers.¹ Under the title "Marmor Stein und Eisen Brecht!" the *taz* ran a series of short "Wortmeldungen" by celebrities in honor of Brecht's birthday, beginning on January 3, 1998 and ending on February 10, 1998, the actual anniversary. The contributors encompassed a wide variety of persons who had any kind of relation to Brecht and his works, including a cigar salesman, a barkeeper, several actors and directors, as well as writers. Within the *taz* series, I will focus mainly on the writers. Most of them grew up at a time when Germany consisted of two separate and opposed countries. They belong to a younger generation and did not get to know Brecht and his works when he was alive. Therefore, they are familiar only with posthumous representations of him.

The other series I will consider has appeared in *Die Zeit*, a weekly newspaper from Hamburg which targets an educated bourgeois readership; Germany's *Bildungsbürgertum*. *Die Zeit* conducted a survey among female authors, directors, and actors about their image of Brecht. The survey ran as a three-part series in February 1998. The paper does not offer any explanation as to why they selected only female contributors. It is most likely, however, that their choice is based on the ongoing discussion on Brecht's relationships to women. In recent years, the role of the women in Brecht's life and their influence on his writing have become the topic of major studies.² Most

notably among them is John Fuegi's 1994 biography *Brecht and Company*.³ In his study, Fuegi claims to have "evidence that the written work Brecht claimed as his was often primarily the work of others, most notably: Elisabeth Hauptmann, Margarethe Steffin, and Ruth Berlau" (xviii).

Within this series, I will again concentrate on the writers among the contributors. The writers were chosen since they constitute a group that is well-represented in both samples.

After an overview of the tendencies in Brecht reception displayed in these sources and the relation between Brecht's works and the authors' own writings, I will relate my findings to a broader context. There are three major shifts that have occurred within the last 10 to 20 years and have considerably reshaped the Brecht reception in Germany. These shifts can be subsumed under the following themes: The Fall of the Iron Curtain and Political Disillusionment, The Reception of Postmodern Philosophy, and The Canonization of Brecht. Again, this paper does not intend to compile one "true" image of Brecht. Instead, this study merely aims to provide a few highlights.

Drawing conclusions from sources that are predominantly journalistic in nature has drawbacks as well as advantages. Distinctly categorizing the statements can become quite difficult since most of them are personal in nature and detached from any research debates on Brecht, to which scholars are accustomed, and to which their statements could be linked. The difficulty, however, also constitutes an interesting challenge. The sources do not provide answers to specific questions. In the *taz*, contributors were not asked any questions at all. For their "Wortmeldungen," the only requirement was that their text be about their relationship with Brecht. Moreover, some of the authors are not yet established on Germany's literary market so that it sometimes proved difficult to gather any information on them at all.

On the other hand, a study like this one promises to yield interesting results exactly because it is unorthodox. It intends to unearth voices that remain inaudible in conventional literary research because what they say is not carefully written and revised for a specific purpose, but rather for a more "spontaneous" print medium. This is what permits this study to be rather "up to date," drawing on sources that, while I write, have not been released and discussed for a long time, but literally only for a few days or weeks. Moreover, because of

the limited space they were given, the contributors had to be very concise.

Out of the 30 contributors in the "Marmor Stein und Eisen Brecht" series, the following ten were defined as writers: Matthias Altenburg, Funny von Dannen, Kerstin Hensel, Ingo Schramm, Dieter Hildebrandt, Käthe Reichel, Rolf Schneider, Lutz Rathenow, Jens Sparschuh, Tom Liwa, Volker Frick, and Yang Lian.

With the exception of Schneider, Hildebrandt, and Lian, all of the above writers grew up in a divided Germany. Facing a united Germany, it may appear problematic to speak of "East" or "West" German authors. With respect to their image of Brecht, however, there seems to be a clear division between those authors who grew up in the GDR and those who lived in the Federal Republic. In general, the Eastern writers who grew up with Brecht as a subject in school take a sceptical stance toward Brecht's political attitudes. Sometimes the rejection can be as radical as that of Schramm who, after describing an orthodox Brecht-loving literature teacher he abhorred, continues:

Ich hatte lange Haare, hörte Hard Rock und war bis aufs letzte rote Blutkörperchen von romantischem Subjektivismus durchtränkt. Brecht war und blieb mir suspekt. . . . Er hat Vorschläge gemacht. Frau Geschichte hat sie zufälligerweise ignoriert. Friede seiner Asche. (n. pag.)⁴

Not all Eastern authors are as strong in their reaction as Schramm who was born in 1962 and became a writer "im Widerwillen gegen den offiziellen DDR-Literaturbetrieb" (Peter Lauterbach n. pag.). Most, however, share his judgment that Brecht's Marxist convictions were "ein schlimmer Betriebsunfall," as Sparschuh puts it (n. pag.). He goes against Brecht's political stance in his poem "Die Maske des Bösen;" a poem, "dem in seiner vertrackten Einfachheit mehr Dialektik innewohnt als dem ganzen Hokuspokus des epischen oder sonstwie Theaters" (n. pag.):

An meiner Wand hängt ein japanisches Holzwerk
Maske eines bösen Dämons, bemalt mit Goldlack.
Mitfühlend sehe ich
Die geschwellenen Stirnadern, andeutend

Wie anstrengend es ist, böse zu sein. (n. pag.)
Sparschuh eventually praises some of Brecht's works in order to save them for a posterity that rejects Brecht's political convictions. Along similar lines, Schneider states that, although they were chiefly intended as "politische Indoktrination," Brecht's works have ultimately survived the downfall of the ideas they promoted (n. pag.). Of the Eastern writers, only Hensel attributes a positive value to reading Brecht in the GDR. She is also the only one to reclaim the applicability of his political point of view for a post-1998 Germany:

Brecht . . . rettete uns über die Zeiten des spießigen Konsumsozialismus in die des spießigen Computerkapitalismus. Heute können wir nun, von Freiheit bekifft und bekloppt, wie der, der "wegen Mangel an Geld/ was das größte Verbrechen ist,/ das auf dem Erdenrund vorkommt," nicht mehr in der Lage ist, das Glück öffentlich zu beschreiben. (n. pag.)

While Eastern authors who grew up in a country that publicly celebrated Brecht now generally disapprove of Brecht's political attitude, their Western counterparts often tend to disregard the political aspects, at least at a surface level. Poet and singer/songwriter van Dannen, born in 1960, for instance, goes into a freewheeling association of the *Augsburger Puppenkiste*, Juventus Turin, "Mackie Messer" as a children's lullaby, and contemporary Augsburg writer Franz Dobler. Van Dannen concludes his contribution by quoting a poem by a Polish author whose name he cannot remember:

Sieh scharf ins Morgen,
Doch prophezeie nicht,
Überlaß das den Quacksalbern.
Wiederzugeben, was ist, ist schwer.
Ich schreibe Gedichte langsam,
Arbeite wie ein Ochs. (n. pag.)

This poem can be read as a criticism as well as an appraisal of Brecht. Whereas Brecht may have tried to write his poetry in a similar fashion, the sheer amount he wrote in his lifetime (nearly 1300 pages)

suggests that he did not write all of them *slowly*. Poems like "An die Nachgeborenen" (Brecht 724-25) definitely suggest an element of prediction.⁵ With this implicit criticism (if it is one), however, van Dannen overlooks that many of Brecht's poems were written in a historical situation in which Brecht simply had to hope that circumstances would become better; "An die Nachgeborenen," for instance, was written in Danish exile in 1939 (Knopf 129-30).

Songwriter and poet Liwa of the music band "The Flowerpornoes" tells a story that is even more remotely related to Brecht. It is about his grandfather's dog which first was called "Konsalik" after a German paperback fiction novelist, but then was renamed. A story like this one indicates, as in the case of van Dannen, how irrelevant some younger Western authors find Brecht for their own writing. The two songwriters do not even mention Brecht's name in their "Wortmeldungen." In other cases, authors claim to have been influenced too strongly by Brecht's writing at an earlier point in their lives. Therefore, they now try to distance themselves from him and his works. As Altenburg puts it:

Mit sechzehn hatte ich die Gesammelten Werke zum zweiten Mal gelesen. Der Schaden ist bis heute nicht abzusehen. Später ging mir der Brecht-Ton auf die Nerven. . . . Brecht und Benn waren die großen Textmaschinen der ersten Jahrhunderthälfte. . . . Das Zeitalter der Maschinen ist vorbei. (n. pag.)

Another path Eastern as well as Western authors in this series took was to contribute creative writing pieces of their own that dealt with Brecht. These texts deal with Brecht's texts in a playful way and the authors are much less dogmatic than the rejections of Brecht's works by Altenburg or Schramm. Eastern writer Rathenow, born in 1952, invents an encounter between Brecht and *Herr Keuner*: "Herr K. bereitet schweigend eine würdige Rolle vor. Brecht schreitet hurtig davon und murmelt: Hab ich den erfunden, mein Gott, wieso" (n. pag.).

What makes this fictional encounter interesting from a political point of view is that *Herr Keuner* sees Brecht as Ernst Jünger who has merely disguised himself as Brecht. What does that "recognition"

imply? Does aligning Brecht with the East German government suggest that Brecht is politically at the same moral level with a highly conservative author like Jünger who has regularly been seen as ideologically linked to the Nazis (Treichel 25)? Are they depicted as similar in their ambivalent relation to totalitarian powers? In their literary mastership? All these readings are plausible. In any case, *Herr Keuner* is portrayed as a powerful literary character who apparently survived his inventor and is obviously strong enough to question even a literary representation of his author.

Along similar lines, Frick narrates a fictional encounter between Brecht and Klaus Mann in a New York City bar during World War II, and Lian contributes a 1993 poem about a visit at Brecht's grave in Berlin. But only Rathenow's piece, although not explicitly stated, makes use of Brecht's literary techniques. The encounter between Brecht and his creation Keuner is certainly an element of *Verfremdung*. Through this encounter, in turn, Brecht is depicted as a character, not as a "real" person outside the literary text. Even more, the instability of this character (should we accept the label "Brecht" at face value; should we call him Jünger?) implicitly questions the validity of the current perceptions of Brecht as a communist, womanizer, genius, etc. Even "Brecht" is confused about his identity. By emphasizing the artificiality of the different perceptions of Brecht, Rathenow questions the more simplistic depictions of such writers as Schramm, Altenburg, and Sparschuh.

A general tendency found in these contributions is that most authors feel compelled to take a predominantly political stance toward Brecht. They discuss him and his works less with respect to their own writing. Even van Dannen's and Liwa's commentaries can be interpreted as a rejection of political literature altogether. Only Hensel still sees a political relevance in Brecht's works by relating them to the deteriorating economical conditions for a large part of the population in contemporary Germany. Frick and Rathenow do not take a specific stance, but counter Brecht's works with their own writing in which Brecht submerges as a literary character.

Whereas the *taz* series draws its contributors from a wide range of areas related to Brecht, the *Die Zeit* series is much narrower in its focus since it only considered female artists and researchers. Out of 21 contributors, seven are introduced as writers: Gisela von Wysocki,

Elfriede Jelinek, Eva Demski, Zoë Jenny, Ria Endres, Brigitte Kronauer, and Friederike Roth. In general, their answers are more elaborate and differentiated than those in the *taz*, possibly because they were given more space. They also had to answer specific questions, such as "Was bedeutet Ihnen Brecht heute?" Some tendencies are similar, such as the depiction of Brecht as an outdated classic: "Der Mann ist geistig geröngt, literaturgeschichtlich entbeint, moralisch verschrottet worden. Was man jetzt noch sagen könnte, bewegt sich im leeren Raum, in der vierten Dimension" (von Wysocki n. pag.).

In some instances, criticism of a part of Brecht's works is linked with the praise of another. Similar to Sparschuh's criticism, Demski rejects Brecht's plays in the light of post-war political events. At the same time, she praises his poetry:

Zusammen mit dem Glauben an die Veränderbarkeit der Welt sind mir Brechts Theaterstücke allmählich abhanden gekommen. . . . Dafür ist mir der Dichter Brecht immer lieber geworden. . . . Das kleine dicke Suhrkamp-Brickett mit den Gedichten Brechts ist eines jener Auf-die-Insel-mitnehm'-Bücher. (n. pag.)⁶

Apart from the similarities, however, there are aspects not addressed in the *taz* series. In contrast to those contributors, Jelinek actually reflects on the economics of Brecht's writing and compares them to de Sade:

Brecht wollte alles geben, doch dafür mußte er viel aufnehmen, vielleicht mehr als andere. Und das Aufnehmen und Abgeben stehen bei ihm in einem sehr durchdachten Verhältnis zueinander. Ja, die Aufgabe erfolgt kontrollierter als bei den meisten anderen Autoren, denke ich. . . . Roland Barthes weist ja auch für den Libertin de Sade nach, daß dessen Verausgabungssucht längst keine schrankenlose ist. Das Essen, minutiös geschildert, ist nötig, um die Spermienbehälter der Herren wieder aufzufüllen . . . nur um sie dann wieder leeren zu können . . . diese genaue Bestimmung erfolgt . . . bei Brecht auf das Bewußtsein der Selbstvergeudung als Künstler hin. (n. pag.)

Jelinek's reflection is also closely related to the discussion sparked by Fuegi: "Er hat alles genommen; besonders viel, und das wird gerade wieder überall diskutiert, von den Frauen, die ihn geliebt und ihm mit der Kraft ihrer Zuneigung zu-gearbeitet haben" (Jelinek n. pag.). Jelinek's argument apparently follows Fuegi's to some extent, but justifies it within the economy of his work.

The majority of the writers in *Die Zeit*, however, sees Brecht's image of women as more positive. Roth, for instance, writes about her favorite Brecht poem, "Erinnerung an die Marie A." (Brecht 232):

Für jene Wolke, die natürlich "nur Minuten blühte", schlägt mein Herz bis heute . . . Diese Wolke taucht auf im zunächst "Sentimentales Gedicht", dann "Erinnerung an Marie A." genannten Gedicht, das naturgemäß eine Vorläufergeschichte hat (wie alles im Leben und in der Kunst - das wissen wir aber doch!). (n. pag.)⁷

The prehistory Roth mentions, together with the de-individualized image of the woman in the poem as suggested by her name (Marie A.), might be interpreted as evidence of Brecht's alleged sexism. This seems most obvious in the original title, "Sentimentales Lied Nr. 1004," which refers to the 1003 women who Casanova, according to his autobiography, supposedly seduced. Such a reading, however, neglects Brecht's intention that his poem be a parody of sentimental bourgeois love poetry (Knopf 35-36).⁸

Demski cites the poem "Auch das Beschädigte" with the words, "Für die Frauen kann doch einer nicht ganz schlecht sein, der seiner Gefährtin in einem Gedicht die Worte widmet" (n. pag.):

Dulde den mindern
Liebreiz der Wang
Siehe, der Hintern
Gleicht sich noch lang. (Brecht 857)

Von Wysocki, while criticizing Brecht for his relationship to Marieluise Fischer, one of Fuegi's chief examples, begins to reflect upon such discussions: "Da sieht man es wieder! Schon mischt man selber mit

beim Brecht-ist-ein-Unhold-Spiel, der Mann bietet sich dazu halt an. Geradezu generalstabsmäßig, deutsch-konsequent hat er sich in diese Rolle hineinmutiert" (n. pag.).

Although these women writers do in general take a rather positive stance toward Brecht, the discussion surrounding Fuegi's biography is an underlying topic of many of the contributors in this series, and the tone of some of these writers is that of justification, even if it is not always as explicit as in the examples of Demski and Roth.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989/90 did not only mark the end of a historical era. In its wake, dramatic shifts of political values have occurred all over Europe. According to playwright Tony Kushner, the political system of the USSR and its allies had long ceased to be a true political alternative for the Western Left, but it had at least provided "an ideological space marked 'alternative'" (Weber 85). It had signified that other and potentially better political systems than Western capitalism were feasible and desirable. With its disappearance, there seems to be hardly any hope for alternative political systems; this shift, in turn, weakens the oppositions to the powers that be (Weber 85). This development has had consequences in the reception of those literary authors who had put their hopes in Marxism to create a better world.⁹ One of those authors is Brecht, and the skepticism toward the validity of his political visions in a post-Cold War world is widely spread even among committed Brecht scholars. John Willett voiced this skepticism in his keynote speech for *The International Brecht Colloquium* in Bourges, France:

Today we have the radically changed political climate of the post-Gorbachev era. Nearly everywhere the communist system has broken down; the Federal Republic has taken over the GDR, and the United States appears to be leading a campaign to seek out and destroy the remnants of that "specter of socialism" which once haunted Europe. So what about Brecht, who did so much to express, dramatize, and poeticize the great socialist ideals . . . ? Does he too now go into the dustbin of history, or does socialism still have something to offer after all? (96-97)¹⁰

Ulrich Klingmann argues that, insofar as Marx and his theoretical conceptions are made responsible for the apparent failure of socialism, Brecht as a Marxist is also contaminated (226). This is true especially for his reception in Germany, where the old regime was not only replaced, but submerged by a Capitalist West and its value system. Alan Riding concludes in a *New York Times* article: "With the unification of Germany in 1990, Brecht's name seemed irrevocably linked to a repressive regime, and a failed ideology" (B1). This, at least, is still a popular opinion among contemporary German intellectuals, and it explains why Sparschuh can regard the author's Marxist values as "einen schlimmen Betriebsunfall in Brechts Leben" (n. pag.).¹¹ Thus, the political image of Brecht has tended to eclipse his works: "Brecht wurde —zumal in der kulturellen Öffentlichkeit, auf dem Theater und in den Schulen—immer nur als Ideologe wahrgenommen, zuerst ablehnend, dann zustimmend, dann wieder ablehnend" (Schlaffer n. pag.). The simplified perception of Brecht as a simple communist whose texts are plain and one-dimensional "politische Indoktrination" (Schneider n. pag.) disregard the critical stance Brecht took toward the East German government in the wake of the 1953 uprising which is mirrored in his poetry cycle "Buckower Elegien" (Klingmann 247). It also fails to recognize that his texts are not so much one-dimensional teachings as complex structures which require the reader's participation in a process of active thoughts as a social being (Klingmann 233). But even reflecting on Brecht, as the answers of Demski and others show, has become rather unpopular in a politically disoriented German left. Moreover, Brecht is often looked upon as a remnant of the Cold War, whose writings have become invalid for a world that has radically changed since then. Leander Hausmann, currently one of Germany's most acclaimed stage directors, maintains "daß das Klassenkämpferische Brechts veraltet ist. Was aus Situationen heraus geschrieben wird, die brandaktuell sind, wenn man sie schreibt, läuft Gefahr, schnell vergänglich zu werden" (10).¹² This shift of values explains the change in reception of one single reader. As Ruth Klüger points out, "Brechts Sozialismus, der mir früher als das unerläßliche intellektuelle Gerüst seiner Stücke vorkam, geht mir heute als rechthaberische Besserwisserie, die die Schwarzweißmalerei der geschilderten Figuren zur Folge hat, auf die Nerven" (n. pag.).

In addition to the political developments, the broad reception

of postmodernist philosophy has posed another challenge to the reception of Brecht's works. According to Klingmann, postmodernist philosophy has often criticized that the "Große Ordnung" to which Brecht aimed to contribute with his works, has victimized millions. These victims could have been avoided if the claim to change the world once and for all would have been less total. From there, postmodern philosophy criticizes all "totalitarian" images and "master narratives" (Klingmann 230-31).¹³ From this point of view, political commitment is discouraged, including a political reading of literary texts. The postmodern era threatens to become

der ästhetisch durchaus feinsinnige, politisch jedoch völlig taubstumme Kolos . . . Für ihn ist die Kunst die Fluchtburg, in die er sich vor seinem Alltag zurückziehen kann, in der er neue Kraft schöpft, um sich auf dem Markt zu bewähren. . . . Politische Literatur . . . begeht in seinem Blick gleich zwei Sakrilegien: erstens, sie stört den Kunstfreund in seinem Idyll auf, zweitens und noch weit schlimmer: sie ist uncool. (Höppner 14-15)

In its more radical forms, postmodern philosophy questions concepts like rationality, reason, identity, and reference altogether and thus threatens to discern any kind of subject that could learn lessons from Brecht's texts and put them into practice (Klingmann 231).¹⁴

The rise of postmodern philosophy in a broad readership, however, coincided with "the Reaganite and Thatcherite 1980's" (Riding B12). In some respects, that era has not yet ended in Germany which was run by the same conservative government for 16 years. Although postmodern philosophy might not deliberately aim to serve a capitalist hegemony, Klingmann argues, it still must be questioned in regard to whom its literary theory serves politically. There is a nexus between literary theory and the powers that be (Klingmann 245-47). This holds especially true for Germany where universities are state-owned institutions and tenured faculty has the status of public officials, *Beamte*. While certainly not consciously aiming at a conservative hegemony, it is their inherent interest that the social and political status quo which guarantees their workplace is maintained. Among other intellectuals, the broad reception of this philosophy has resulted in a major disillusionment,

as can be seen in the answers of Demski and others.¹⁵ On the other hand, the postmodern relativation of Brecht as a literary authority has certainly facilitated the playfulness with which Brecht can be treated by Rathenow and Frick, as well as the *taz* house cartoonist Tom who has celebrated Brecht's birthday with one of his daily cartoons in a school setting,¹⁶ and even the series title "Marmor Stein und Eisen Brecht!" which is an allusion to a German hit parade song from the 1960's.

The third major shift is that there has been a resurgence of the strong Brecht reception that Germany experienced throughout the 1960's and 1970's in the West and since the 1950's in the East. Brecht has been presented as a Socialist "classic" whose works have to be read and understood largely in terms already prefigured by the state. This is obvious for East Germany and accounts for the aversion to Brecht among a younger generation which increasingly questioned the government and its cultural politics. The aggressive reaction of Schramm, who associated Brecht with a politically orthodox teacher he despised, is just one example of this. But this aversion to the "classic" Brecht even got hold of those who had witnessed the author's works in practice. As a child, Haußmann had witnessed rehearsals at the *Berliner Ensemble* while it was run by Helene Weigel after Brecht had died. Even he rediscovered Brecht only after finishing school because of the teachers' strong emphasis on Brecht's communist outlook. In his rediscovery and obviously influenced by the political and philosophical paradigm shifts, he denies the communist impetus in Brecht in general:

In der Schule begegnete man nicht so sehr dem Literaten, als dem Kommunisten Brecht. Das war, was uns, der nachfolgenden Generation, ihn ein bißchen verleidet hat, diese verlogene Geschichte, er sei ein Kommunist gewesen. . . . Insofern war es ein mieser Trick von der DDR, uns Brecht, der einfach ein genialischer Theatermann war, als Kommunist zu verkaufen. (Haußmann 8)

The reception in West Germany also changed over time. While even the possession of one of his books was still a reason to be expelled from a Catholic school in the 1950's (Endes n. pag.), Brecht's works

were heavily read in West German high schools and universities after 1968 ("Brecht auf!" n. pag.), which likely caused later students, like Liwa and van Dannen, to revolt against reading Brecht. As professor of literature Sigrid Weigel puts it:

Meine behaarliche Indifferenz gegenüber der Literatur Brechts ist das Resultat eines vermutlich generationsbedingten Überdrusses, eines Germanistikstudiums Anfang der siebziger Jahre. Die Unvermeidlichkeit, mit der man "damals" im Klo jeder Wohngemeinschaft auf das Plakat mit einem Lehrsatz Brechts blicken mußte, und die endlosen Erörterungen der "Brecht-Lukács-Debatte" und der Lehrstücke in den Seminaren hinterließen eine bleibende Unlust, überhaupt einen Brecht-Text zur Hand zu nehmen. (n. pag.)

Weigel's description suggests that Brecht was read in West Germany as an authority by many readers who might have tended to take the texts at face value instead of reading them against the grain, quite in contrast to the process of thinking he aimed at with his texts (Klingmann 230). Weigel goes even further: "Daß Brecht, seiner unkonventionellen Montage- und Zitatästhetik zum Trotz . . . schon zum Klassiker erstarren konnte, ist der paradoxe Effekt seiner Popularität und vielleicht zu großen Wirkung" (n. pag.). One must not forget that the intellectuals who read Brecht in the 1960's and 1970's are now middle-aged, and many of them are in well-established positions, have tenure, run theatres, and run for elections. Thus, they are also a target of revolt for younger generations, as the struggle over Brecht is a minor battlefield in a generational struggle.

Brecht, however, has not only been praised by liberal and left-wing German readers. The broad media coverage and the number of official events in the name of Brecht's birthday show that Brecht has become an officially acknowledged, canonized writer. The "zum Schulbuchklassiker und Vorzugsautor bürgerlicher Stadttheater aufgestiegene Dichter kann nunmehr gefeiert werden selbst von Leuten, die sich anderntags wieder in wütender Polemik gegen die "Roten Hosen" ergehen" (Schneider n. pag.).¹⁷

From the official embrace many readers, among them Altenburg, Laußmann, Weigel, and Demski, seem to conclude that Brecht's works

must generally be outdated, since they are now considered as harmless for the current political establishment in Germany. For these readers, the celebration is merely a sign of the canonization of a writer who once may have been regarded as revolutionary and disturbing the bourgeois order, as has been the case with Kleist, Kafka and Heine. This can also be regarded as a late triumph for an old Western policy toward Brecht that Schneider mentions—to separate the political and aesthetic aspects of Brecht's work and only to celebrate the former ones.¹⁸ The larger-than-life classic Brecht then becomes an authority many young writers like van Dannen, Liwa, and Altenburg feel they have to dissociate from in order to develop their own writings.¹⁹ This becomes especially clear in Altenburg's demonstrative gesture: "Mit sechzehn hatte ich die Gesammelten Werke zum zweiten Mal gelesen. Der Schaden ist bis heute nicht abzusehen" (n. pag.), but also in the urge of Rathenow and Frick to counter the author Brecht with their own creations of Brecht as a literary character.

Where does the German reception of Brecht proceed from here? Is there a chance for a more positive and more politically subversive reading of Brecht in the near future?

First of all, the variety of attitudes toward Brecht even in the two series examined here is much broader than could be demonstrated within a sample that in both cases included only about a third of the total number of contributors. Thus, many more facets, many more current images of Brecht in contemporary Germany could not be examined here. Marc Silbermann, editor of the 1998 joint edition of *Theater der Zeit* and *The Brecht Yearbook*, argues that the lively discussions on Brecht are far from being over:

Die Qualität der . . . Beiträge . . . erweisen [sic] die heute zu oft zitierten Klischees als falsch: Brecht Müdigkeit [sic], Eiszeit für Brecht, Denkmal Brecht, die Musealisierung Brechts. . . Die Vielfalt der hier ausgewählten Ansätze ist dafür ein Zeugnis: Enttäuschung, Verteidigung, Provokation, Nostalgie, Ablehnung, Verleugnungen, Berichterstattung, Historisieren. Das sind Haltungen, die durchschimmern. (4)

While the importance and validity of Brecht's writing for German politics is presently considered rather minimal, this could change in

the face of Germany's increasing social problems, including the highest unemployment rates since the early 1930's on the one hand and the highest profits ever generated by German corporations in history on the other. As Germany's political establishment sheds more and more of its social institutions and rapidly cuts back on the existing ones, as the "Soziale Marktwirtschaft" models itself more and more into "pure" capitalism, there is hope for more social and political activism of an opposition, and thus for a new Brecht renaissance that opts to use Brecht's texts as models for learning rather than the writings of a dead classic. This is what actress Susanne Lothar articulates in *Die Zeit*:

In Zeiten mit fast fünf Millionen Arbeitslosen - wo ein Arbeitnehmer sich keine Arbeit mehr nehmen kann, weil keine mehr da ist, jedenfalls nicht da, wo er so fortschrittsfeindlich unglobal seine kleine Heimat definiert, und bei einer Politikerklasse, die von den Arbeitgebern auf den Strich geschickt wird . . . ist der hundertjährige Brecht plötzlich wieder ganz jung. (n. pag.)²⁰

University of Oregon

Notes

¹This assumption is partly confirmed by the fact that the *taz* could run a Brecht title page on February 10, 1998. The title page consisted entirely of headlines announcing current events that were followed by excerpts from Brecht's works on similar topics instead of regular news articles. See "Seite 1" n. pag.

²The topic is not entirely new. Among others, Klaus Theleweit brought it up as early as 1988 in the first volume of his monumental study *Buch der Könige*. See "Orpheus im realen Sozialismus" 706-39. Here, Theleweit speaks about Brecht's poem "Nach dem Tod meiner Mitarbeiterin M.S." He does not criticize Brecht for leaving her behind in a Moscow hospital in order to make it to the U.S., but rather sees her transforming into Eurydice so Brecht can stylize himself into an Orpheus character (714-15).

³Fuegi's book has caused major surges in Brecht research; yet, it is

not specific to *German* scholarship. Therefore, I will not concentrate on the ongoing discussion.

⁴This quote is an allusion to Brecht's poem "Ich benötige keinen Grabstein:"

Ich benötige keinen Grabstein, aber
Wenn ihr einen für mich benötigt
Wünschte ich, es stünde darauf:
Er hat Vorschläge gemacht. Wir
haben sie angenommen. (Brecht 1029)

⁵In particular, see the third section: "Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut . . ." (724).

⁶A lot of other similarities could be added to this list. Just to mention one of them, Jenny has also contributed a "literary" portrait (like Rathenow and Frick), albeit more lyrical in nature: "Wäre Bertolt Brecht ein Land, dann läge es irgendwo im Nordosten. . . . Es gäbe kein Meer, keine Seen, keine Flüsse; nur ebenes Land mit sehr vielen Bäumen, zum Teil sehr alten Bäumen. In die Stille hinein hörte man von Zeit zu Zeit das Trompetengeschmetter der Kraniche, die in dichten Schwärmen über den Himmel zögen" (n. pag.).

⁷Roth alludes to the following lines: "Doch jene Wolke blühte nur Minuten/Und als ich aufsaß, schwand sie schon im Wind" (Brecht 232). Looking at this poem, even Altenburg concedes in spite of his rejection of Brecht in general: "Aber die Lyrik, die Lyrik! Ja, freilich jene Wolke . . ." (n. pag.).

⁸The poem itself is loosely based on Brecht's first love relationship to Marie Rose Aman, a barber's daughter in Augsburg, which had an unhappy ending. For an account of this relationship, see Mittenzwei 50-52, 158.

⁹For a description of these developments, see Höppner 14-15.

¹⁰Obviously, Marxism is still being discussed and developed as a philosophy. However, it can hardly be denied that it does not have the same appeal in Western countries as it did 30 years ago or even in the 1980's.

¹¹It would be of interest to research specific motivations for judgments like this, i.e. whether these authors were former Marxists who revised their beliefs after the *Wende*. Sparschuh, for instance, used to teach German Literature at Humboldt University in Berlin from 1978-83; a position he would not have held had he openly opposed the East German government at the time (Lindenberg n. pag.).

¹²For Hausmann, the political impetus of Brecht's works is mostly of historical interest: "Man könnte zeigen: es gab einmal so etwas wie einen Klassenkampf, was wir vergessen haben, und Menschen, die sich dafür engagiert und aus dieser Situation heraus gute Theaterstücke geschrieben haben" (10).

¹³Klingmann takes a very heterogeneous group of philosophers (some,

like Derrida, would even claim that they do not consider themselves philosophers) and turns them into one monolithic block with one opinion. Although this is obviously a simplification, the simplification might be justified insofar as the combined receptions of these thinkers might very well cause the shift in German Brecht reception.—As an example of a “master narrative” serve the opening sentences of the *Communist Manifesto*:

Die Geschichte aller bisherigen Gesellschaft ist eine Geschichte von Klassenkämpfen. . . . Unterdrücker und Unterdrückte . . . führten einen . . . Kampf, der jedesmal mit einer revolutionären Umgestaltung der Gesellschaft endete oder mit dem gemeinsamen Untergang der kämpferischen Klassen” (Marx, Engels 44, my emphasis).

¹⁴Klingmann argues that in accordance with their premises, postmodern theories mostly refuse to legitimize themselves on a rational basis. In contrast to this, sociological research shows that human beings are always determined by their social and economical status in a given society and cannot exist without social interaction. Within this social context, we can learn and draw conclusions from literary text. That means, identity and truth exist, but they are subject to a constant change, i. e. through learning. Exactly because Brecht’s poems aim at that constant questioning, a reshaping, they have not become invalid (233).

¹⁵Admittedly, the stance of postmodern literary theory (not of writers or a broad readership) toward Brecht has been less monolithic. There have even been attempts to win Brecht’s work for the postmodern movement(s). Claudette Sartillot, for example, tries to show parallels between Brecht’s theatrical works and Derrida’s writings (115-152). Hans-Christian von Hermann examines Brecht’s use of (then) contemporary media in the light of Friedrich Kittler’s media theory.

¹⁶See title page of this study.

¹⁷The term “Rote Socken” refers to the PDS, the follow-up party of the former SED, minted by the CDU in 1994 when the PDS not only maintained its residence in Eastern state parliaments, but even gained more seats during the elections.

¹⁸The canonization of Brecht may be one of the foundations for Fuegi’s criticism. The very status of Brecht as a classic is mirrored in the attitude that Fuegi seems to take in his project, that of an iconoclast attacking a monument, trying to de-throne Brecht in similar ways as statues of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin were taken from their pedestals at the beginning of this decade.

¹⁹The fact that van Dannen claims that he cannot remember the name of the Polish poet whose poem he quotes, may be interpreted as a resistance against “classics,” against poets as authorities, resenting the poet becoming more important than his writings.—Interestingly, the general atti-

tude of the mostly male writers in the *taz* is more negative than that of the female writers in *Die Zeit*. Do the former regard Brecht as more of a rival in writing than the latter?

²⁰In the same week’s edition, Linda Reisch argues along similar lines: “Vielleicht wird die Lektüre hier auch bald wieder interessanter, weil mit pur kapitalistischen Verhältnissen gedroht wird” (n. pag.).

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